Alexander Bevilacqua: *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, 360 pp., ISBN 978-06-749-7592-7

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Alexander Bevilacqua's monograph is a detailed study of a pivotal period in the European study of Islam and a most welcome contribution to the history of orientalism.

The term "republic of letters" refers to an informal but important intellectual community of European writers and scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They created, by way of correspondence and publication, an intellectual community that transcended the boundaries of nation-states. Bevilacqua posits the existence of a smaller-scale scholarly "republic" formed by those who studied Islamic texts, especially in Arabic. These scholars, English, Dutch, French, Italian and German, drew on each other's work and in doing so, established a basis for the European study of Islam. Some of them are barely known, even to Islamicists; others, like George Sale, first English translator of the Qurʾān (1734), and Barthélemay D'Herbelot, compiler of the *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697), are more prominent, at least to specialists. It was nonetheless thanks to the work of these relatively obscure men that eighteenth-century Europe significantly revised and refined its view of Islam.

An initial chapter treats the practice of library building and manuscript hunting in the Middle East, conveying some of the bibliophile's excitement and sense of adventure. The second chapter treats the translation of the Qurʾān. Bevilacqua describes in fascinating detail the gestation and difficult birth of Ludovico Marracci's (1612–1700) edition and Latin translation. Marracci faced various obstacles, from internal Vatican politics to the technical problem of printing an Arabic text, but he ultimately prevailed. The latter part of the chapter treats George Sale and his English rendering. Sale was dependent on Marracci for his remarkable translation, which would remain the standard English version until the twentieth century.

Chapter Three, "A New View of Islam", sketches the shift towards a more accurate and frequently more sympathetic view of Islam and Muslims. Belvilacqua treats here the French biblical scholar Richard Simon and the

Dutch Adriaan Reland, but the hero of this chapter is Edward Pococke (1604–1691), first Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, of whose *Specimen historæ arabum* Bevilacqua writes, "Sometimes a single book really does transform a field of study and inaugurate a new way of thinking and writing." In addition to translating a passage of Bar Hebraeus' (d. 1286) history, Pococke provided a commentary that referred to numerous great Muslim scholars, not just those like Avicenna who were already known in Europe, but Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Suyūṭī and al-Shahrastānī and various poets as well. (He was also one of the few to spend time in the Muslim world.) As Bevilacqua notes, a good part of the changing attitudes of the time was due simply to the fact that knowledge was expanding, that more texts were being obtained, studied and translated.

Barthélemy D'Herbelot's hugely important *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697) is the topic of Chapter Four, while the fifth concentrates on the study of Islamic history, featuring Simon Ockley, author of *History of the Saracens* (1708–1718). It also discusses Eusèbe Renaudot (1646–1720) and Johann Jacob Reiske (1717–1774) who, in a field of little-known scholars, reached new levels of obscurity in that most of their work was unpublished in their lifetimes.

This revised view of Islam was surprisingly positive. Or, to be more precise, it was a vast improvement on prevailing European knowledge and opinion. Islam was no longer simply a heresy to be feared and reviled; absurd myths like Muhammad claiming to receive divine messages from a trained dove were refuted and condemned as having no basis in Islamic sources. The Dutch scholar Reland noted that the European view of Islam as full of "silly fictions" did not sit well with its obvious popularity in much of the world.

That is not to say that all scholarship was irenic. Marracci saw his Qurʾān project as means of combatting Islam; it was meant to be polemical and aid the struggle against the heathen. At the same time, it maintained a tradition, begun in the Renaissance, of maintaining high scholarly standards and philological rigor even when describing the ostensible enemy. The result was a careful translation accompanied by hostile commentary.

The English translator George Sale was markedly more sympathetic. His was a more evolutionary view of religion, seeing influences and emulation of traditions, rather than simple heresy. He could write that the Qurʾān contains "many things intermixed not unworthy even a Christian's perusal" and respected, among other things, the fact that Muslims

> admit not their women to pray with them in public [...] for the Moslems are of the opinion that their presence inspires a different kind of devotion from that which is requisite in a place dedicated to the worship of GOD.

Inter-confessional understanding had its limits. Barthélemy d'Herbelot could write that Muhammad was an imposter, while his *Bibliothèque orientale* was a sympathetic, often admiring reference work on Islamic civilization, based almost entirely on sources in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish. In his very learned and sympathetic *Preliminary Discourse* to his Qur'ān translation, Sale is clearly conditioned by his own sense of what constitutes a proper religion. He could write of the Hajj, for instance, "[...] the greater part of these rites are of no intrinsic worth [...] but [...] commanded merely to try the obedience of mankind, without any further view."

A number of themes emerge throughout *The Republic of Arabic Letters*, not least the relation to classical scholarship. In recent generations, orientalist philology has become somewhat detached from its classical relatives (although this is changing). Greek and Latin loom large over the Arabic Republicans, as classical tradition was the standard by which all was measured. The study of a non-Christian religion, Islam, was justified early on by the parallel with the ancient world, from the idea that there was benefit in studying pagan people and their customs. Bevilacqua describes Pococke's achievement as "endow[ing] the history of the Arabs and Islam with the same dignity afforded to that of the Greeks and Romans."

These pioneering orientalists also recognized explicitly that the Muslims were heirs to much of the Greek tradition and acknowledged their role in preserving much of it. At the same time, some lamented that the Muslims had not similarly adopted Greek historiography, the Arabic chronicles appearing disjointed and highly unsatisfactory. But even this could be defended. As Reiske put it: "[...] they were more expert at accomplishing great things worthy of being remembered than at making written records of them, and preferred to strike their contemporaries with the gleam of their weapons, than posterity with the ornament of their words."

In addition to the classical parallel, there was a sense that Muslims belonged to the same monotheist family. Wayward relatives they may be, but their beliefs were not so different. The Europeans were naturally most interested in those aspects of Islam that seemed most familiar, that is mainly scripture and theology, as opposed to, say, hadith and ritual. They wrestled with questions that seemed pertinent to their age, questions which contemporary scholarship has largely abandoned. Repeatedly we find the "Republic of Arabic Letters" discussing the overly sensual nature of the Muslim paradise as described in the

Qurʾān. This seemed to them again contrary to what a "proper" religion should say. Another standard problem was the Prophet Muhammad. He could not have been the Messenger of God, so then how to explain him? Was he a charlatan, or was he somehow sincere in his preaching and his actions? Was *raison d'état* compatible with religious sincerity? Some, such as Sale and Voltaire, argued it was.

There was also a certain anxiety, still present in certain circles today, that Islam appeared to lack "mystery", in that it did not demand for instance the leap of the faith required by the idea of the Trinity, that it was too rational and therefore was particularly dangerous in its potential appeal.[1]

Bevilacqua duly notes, as others have done, that whatever their differences, these scholars hewed closely to their sources, accepting fairly uncritically the standard Sunni Muslim view on various opinions, such as the validity of Shiism or the reputation of the Umayyads. Arguments against Islam tended to be theological; philology was not yet a weapon, and we must wait until the nineteenth century for the methods of biblical criticism to reach the study of Islam.

It is unfortunate that we know very little about the lives of these men and what motivated them to take up with such commitment a marginal field of study. We do, however, know a great deal about the subjects of Bevilacqua's last chapter, "Islam and the Enlightenment". Here we see how the solitary labours of a handful of (no doubt) eccentrics were taken up by Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, who incorporated them into their own writings and brought them to the attention of a much broader reading public.

But if Gibbon and Voltaire propagated the new and revised vision of Islam one should still be wary, says Bevilacqua, of associating the orientalists with an Enlightenment scepticism towards religion. Many of his scholars were believers, both Catholic and Protestant and in some cases, their research had explicitly religious motivations. It is not the case, he argues, that the more informed and sympathetic view of Islam derived from Enlightenment free-thinking. This seems accurate enough, but as Bevilacqua himself acknowledges, the period was one of "a wider transformation in the understanding and comparative study of religions, one in which both Catholic and Protestant scholars participated." It was not just Islam that was seen in a different light, it was religion in general.

We know to be wary of generalization and stereotypes of other cultures. *The Republic of Arabic Letters* demonstrates, indirectly, the dangers of generalizations and stereotypes about those who study other cultures. As Bevilacqua puts it, "The Republic of Arabic Letters stands as a reminder of a moment of

1 See, e.g., Gilliot 2007.

intercultural possibility that our historical macronarratives have often overlooked." I doubt that his subjects would have described their efforts as an "intercultural possibility", but it also seems to be true that subsequent scholarship on Islam, with the advent of colonialism and critical philology, took a more assertive, haughtier approach to its subject. On the other hand, one of the key lessons of Bevilacqua's excellent book is the importance of looking at not just the big picture but the fine print, as it were, of the individuals who took up this rather unusual field of study.

References

Gilliot, Claude (2007): "Réflexions sur les raisons qui peuvent conduire à se convertir à l'islam". *Lumière et vie* 276: 99–106.